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The Third Sunday of Easter

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our "Pod Cast" site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lesson: John 14:15-20; 20:11-17

Jesus said to [Mary Magdalene], "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." (John 20:17)

Today is the third Sunday of the Easter season. The Easter season is a time when we traditionally reflect on those passages of scripture that describe the disciples' experience of the risen Christ. We read these passages not only as descriptions of what the eleven and Jesus' other followers experienced during the period between his resurrection and his ascension, but also as guidelines for our own spiritual journey. We hope that, like Jesus' followers, we will be able to discover or rediscover the risen Christ in our lives.

This morning I would like us to think about a single passage from the account of Mary Magdalene's experience of the risen Christ by the tomb on Easter morning. As recorded in the Gospel of John, when Mary comes to the tomb to prepare her Lord's body for burial, she finds the stone has been removed. She runs to tell Peter and John that the tomb is empty.

Peter and John run to the tomb. They find the linen wrappings in place, but the cloth that had been on Jesus' head is rolled up in a place by itself. Scripture tells us that "they believed," but it does not tell us *what* they believed. Apparently, they do not yet grasp the full implication of the empty tomb. Scripture says, "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (John 20:9). The disciples return to their homes.

Mary remains by the tomb. As she weeps, she bends over to look into the tomb. There she sees two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. The angels ask her why she is weeping. Mary tells them that someone has taken away her Lord. Note that she does not say they have taken away her Lord's *body*, but they have taken away *her Lord*. This, of course, is exactly what has happened: Mary has lost not only Jesus' body, but also Jesus himself through his death.

Mary turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she does not know that it is Jesus. Jesus asks her why she is weeping. He asks her whom she seeks. Supposing him to be the caretaker, Mary asks him if he knows where her Lord's body has been taken. At this point, Jesus calls her name. Suddenly Mary's eyes are opened, and she recognizes him as her Lord. This is the same sort of experience that the two disciples have later that day with Jesus in Emmaus. When Jesus breaks bread with them, "their eyes are opened, and they recognize him."

As soon as the two disciples recognize him, Jesus "vanishes from their sight." With Mary, the conversation following the recognition is more extensive. In this exchange, Jesus says something very interesting to Mary. Jesus tells her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."

Mary and the other disciples knew the human Jesus of Nazareth. They traveled with him. They heard his words and witnessed his healing miracles. They broke bread with him every day for the past three years. They had a relationship with him, a relationship that changed their lives.

Now this man whom they followed, this man who meant so much to them is dead. Mary and the disciples miss the Jesus whom they knew. If they could, they would wish him back to earth. They would like him to do for himself what he did for his friend, Lazarus. They do not yet understand the deeper meaning of his death and resurrection, his promise that after his death he would return to them in a new way.

Only a few days before his death, Jesus tells his disciples,

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Jesus tells the disciples that after he leaves them,

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

He then tells them that it is for their own benefit that he will die. He says,

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you.

In these passages, Jesus is telling his disciples that his death is not a tragedy; rather, it is a necessary part of a transformation from matter to spirit that will ultimately benefit the disciples, and that will prove to be of immeasurable benefit to us as well.

These passages of scripture remind me of two Buddhist teachings. The first is a strange teaching. It tells us, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him."

When I first encountered this teaching, which I later learned has been attributed to the Buddhist Ch'an Master Lin-Chi who died in 866 C.E., I thought that it must have been said or written by someone who doesn't like Buddhists. But most people like Buddhists! I mean, what's not to like? Buddhists are really nice people. They are nonviolent. They don't even like to kill and eat little animals. In addition, this is purportedly a Buddhist saying. So why would a Buddhist tell us that if we actually met the Buddha on the road, we should kill him?

I think this teaching addresses a human tendency that, as we heard, Jesus addresses with his disciples. If Jesus were to appear on earth right now in human form,

and if we were convinced it was Jesus, what would we do? We would probably listen very carefully to his teachings. We would probably write down everything he said. We would become his followers. We might even worship him (though I am not sure that this is what he would want us to do).

So, what is the problem with this? From one perspective, there is absolutely nothing wrong with it. We would become disciples of Jesus, followers of Jesus just like the original twelve. From another perspective, however, there is a danger to this kind of discipleship. By focusing our attention on the outer human Jesus, the human incarnation of the Christ, we might never discover the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. We might never discover the spark of divinity within.

Jesus tells his disciples that *it will be to their advantage* that he will leave them. How could this be to their advantage? It will be to their advantage because as long as he is with them in human form, they will not discover the Spirit that God has placed within them, the Spirit of God who dwells within the depths of their souls. The human Jesus of Nazareth has to die; he has to disappear for his followers to discover him in a new form, to discover him as a living presence from whom they can never again be separated.

I think this is the meaning of the saying, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." The Buddha tells us that we cannot become enlightened by believing in him, nor can one find enlightenment by becoming a disciple or follower of him or anyone else. As the Zen master Basho (died 1694) has said, "Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; seek what they sought." *True* enlightenment is the discovery of our own Buddha-nature, the Holy Spirit, our eternal soul, the spark of divinity within us, that which was with us all along, even when we were living in the darkness of ignorance. The Buddha tells us that it is more important that we find the spark of divinity within ourselves than that we witness it in him. In fact, our worship of him could actually become a distraction. *By locating divinity outside ourselves, we remain essentially blind to our own divinity.*

From the passages we heard this morning from the Gospel of John, I think Jesus would agree with the Buddha. I think he would agree with the Japanese Zen Master Dogen who said, "If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?" I think Jesus would agree that by locating divinity, the kingdom of God, outside ourselves, even in him, we remain blind to the priceless treasure that lies within.

The second Buddhist teaching that I believe might help us understand what Jesus said to Mary by the tomb is the Buddha's teaching about attachment. In the exchange that is the focus of our reflections this morning, Jesus tells Mary not to become attached to him in human form. If she were to hold onto this human form, if she were to cling to this human form, she would only cause suffering for herself. She would miss the opportunity to rediscover Jesus in a new and different form.

Buddhism tells us that our suffering arises as a result of our attachments. In order to eliminate suffering in our lives and in the world, we need to identify that to which we are attached, that which we seek to control, and let this go. This is also one of the central themes of Jesus' life and teaching. As we reflect on the way that Mary and the disciples had to give up what they had to discover something greater, we hopefully will be able to identify and let go of that which is holding us back from the discovery of the risen Christ within.

The central dynamic underlying all our attachments is the matter of self-centeredness. Self-centeredness is the root of our suffering and also the suffering that we inflict upon others. Jesus tells us that our self-centeredness needs to be replaced by Christ-centeredness, by God-centeredness. In the words of the apostle Paul, we need

to die to the old self to enter the new life that is offered to us by Christ and in Christ. In Galatians 2:19-20 Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." In this passage, Paul is basically telling us that we need to let go of our attachment to ourselves, that we need to die to ourselves if we are to discover the kingdom of God within.

For those of us who have lost loved ones, and that is many of us, probably most of us, actually *all of us*, this is an important teaching. When the people whom we love are alive, we want to be near them; we want to be with them; we want to touch them; we want to hold them. We want to keep them with us forever. When they die, we feel bereft; we feel as if we have lost them.

To some extent, this is true. We have lost them in one form. But this form, the human form, could no longer hold them. If they stayed in human form, it would only cause them great suffering. They had to be released from this form to return to God and also to be with us in a new and different way. If we center our thoughts on our loss of them as we experienced them in human form, we may miss the rediscovery of them in our lives today.

Jesus tells Mary and the disciples not to cling to him. He tells Mary and the disciples to let go of him that he might ascend to the Father. As he did with the disciples, so, also, he tells us not to cling to our attachments. He tells us to let go of our attachments, our attachments to our possessions, our attachments to our loved ones, our attachments to our beliefs, *even our attachment to him*. Like the Buddha, Jesus tells us that grasping, whether it is the grasping of possessions or the grasping of our religious beliefs or the grasping of special people only produces suffering. It certainly produces suffering in us. Then, through us, it is bound to produce suffering in others.

Jesus tells us that if we cannot let go of the human form of someone we love, we will find it difficult to rediscover our loved one within us. We will feel empty and lost, just as the disciples felt following their master's death. Jesus is telling us to trust, to open our hearts that we might experience the faith that will lead to a magnificent discovery. I believe this is what the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 when he says that we Christians should not grieve as those do who have no faith.

"Do not try to hold on to me." This directive to Mary Magdalene is a profound teaching in relation to the human Jesus. It opens Mary to the experience of the Holy Spirit within her. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, she may have felt separated from the human Jesus, but she can never be separated from the Holy Spirit, the presence of God within her, a presence that has been both shaped and mediated by her relationship with Jesus of Nazareth.

Unlike Mary and the other disciples, we never actually met the human Jesus of Nazareth. We were not privileged to walk with him, to listen to his teaching, to break bread with him. We did not have the experiences of the risen Christ that the disciples had following his resurrection. But this is actually not as great a loss as it might seem. When we experience the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God who dwells both within and among us, we find that we actually connect or reconnect with the human Jesus and his teachings, with Jesus and his healing presence in a deeper way. We also realize that we can never be separated from him, *that he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves*.

There are many times in life when we just have to let go. We may have to let go of some of our expectations of other people or of life. We may have to let go of some of our dreams. We have to let go of our children when they grow up. As painful as it is, we have to let go of our loved ones when they die. And we will have to let go of this life, this precious gift of life when the time comes. If we cannot let go, we, and also our loved ones, will experience tremendous suffering.

The Greek word that our Bible translates as faith, the word *pistis*, actually means trust. So, faith and trust are essentially the same. It takes a lot of faith, a lot of trust in God to let go, and yet we need to do it. It took a lot of faith, a lot of trust for Mary and the other disciples to let go of the Jesus whom they knew and loved to rediscover him in a new and different way. If we have faith, if we can really trust God enough to let go, we might just rediscover that which we seek in a new and different form. Then we will no longer believe, we will know from our own experience that love is stronger than death, and that nothing can ever separate us from God, from Jesus, and from our loved ones.

As we journey forth as twenty-first century disciples, God grant that the light within us will never go out, and that we will find ways to share this precious light with a broken and darkened world.